

A HOUSE WREN STUDY

BY MRS. MARIE DALES

When we moved to our new home, I was uprooted from nineteen years of residence in one place. I felt strange and lonely. I wondered if this house would ever be home to me. As a panacea for this strangeness and loneliness I turned to my neighbors, the birds, for comfort. I soon became deeply interested in their affairs, part of the time more interested than I was in my own. I had a new house, I wanted the birds to have new houses, too. It was getting late in the spring, the lawn had not been leveled off, the clothes posts were not in, all about was confusion, there really seemed to be no great inducement to the birds to come, no really good places for houses, however I very laboriously fashioned one out of a very small cigar box, which I suspended in one of the two trees our front lawn afforded, never dreaming it would have an occupant. It was not long until Father House Wren spied it, and straightway began to furnish the house. He carried sticks and sang, all by himself, for several days.

One morning I chanced to be looking out, and saw him in company with a female in a small elm near the back door. It was too funny to see him lead her to the top of the tree which contained the little house and hop down, branch by branch, until he brought her to the door. His attitude seemed to say, "See what a beautiful home I have to offer." She took one look in through the door, flirted her tail as much as to say, "No love in a cottage for me," and away she flew. A few days more of building and singing, when, lo! he had found a mate, and home-making began in earnest. I spent many pleasant moments watching their family life, particularly since there were no other birds on the place. When it came time for the brood to leave the nest, I was fortunate in seeing them as they emerged, and was utterly astounded to see six little birds hop out. It is a mystery to me how they were ever reared to maturity in so small a box. The next day Father Wren began to clean house. I saw that without help it was going to be a long process, so I lent my assistance. A new nest was built and a second brood reared. I missed seeing the departure of any but the last two young birds. The last one was too cowardly to leave the nest until hunger drove him out the next morning. I now fashioned another house, a crude affair to be sure, which I placed on a low pole in a clump of lilacs, within easy reach, affording an opportunity for closer study. Father Wren was delighted with this more commodious house, and began building right off. Thus placing an option on it for occupancy the following spring.

Up to this time my bird studying had been along popular lines, books written to appeal to the uninitiated. Ornithology was rather a terrifying word, and Ornithological Magazines, obviously, were only for those more learned than I, on the subject. So I was rather unprepared for the damaging accusations against my little neighbor. My mind was open to conviction, however, and the following spring found me studying the wrens with an idea of finding out if these things were really true.

We now have a martin house, three bluebird boxes, and another wren box. By furnishing food, water and nesting material many birds found inducements to nest in close proximity; Catbirds, Brown Thrashers, Yellow Warblers and Goldfinches nested in surrounding shrubs, while one pair of Bluebirds and two pairs of Purple Martins occupied houses.

A pair of Catbirds shared the same clump of lilacs with (as I like to think) the same pair of wrens that nested on the place the year before. The Catbird nest was within eight feet of the wren box. When there were four eggs in the nest, so placed that I could look into it without making any disturbance, a severe windstorm loosened the nest from its moorings and spilled the eggs. The Catbirds immediately set about and built another nest in the same clump, laid five eggs and reared five young. I never once saw the wren disturb the Catbird's nest. The pair of wrens reared a brood of five. The parents and one of the brood were banded, the rest got away. Whether the female left him or met a tragic death I never knew. The male remained mateless the rest of the season. Another pair of wrens came late and took possession of a box on a window casing. They reared a brood of five. The parents and four of the brood were banded. In all nine wrens were banded that year (1924). This wren box was about twenty feet from the bluebird and martin houses. The Bluebirds reared two broods of four birds each. I could not determine how many broods were reared by the martins. I never saw the wrens disturb any of these nests, nor did the bluebirds or martins show any animosity toward the wrens.

The following spring (1925) not a banded wren came back to its former nesting place, nor did I see one anywhere in the locality. Those that came and took possession of the boxes were veritable imps of destruction. Shortly before their coming, I put up two Robin nest shelves, one on the north under the porch eaves, the other on the south side under the garage eave. I was so delighted when I discovered a pair of Robins building in the north side nest shelf. I gave all the

assistance I could, by furnishing rags, string and a panful of mud. Before the nest was quite finished, I happened around the corner one morning, and saw a wren viciously tearing the nest to pieces. I never dreamed so small a bundle of feathers could show such fury. Of course that settled this nest. The Robins abandoned it. My neighbor had two nest shelves, both occupied by Robins, both nests contained eggs; these were thrown out by the wrens. Both nests were abandoned. The Robins became discouraged, and made no further attempts to nest, either in my yard or that of my neighbor. The year before five nests were distributed over this area. On the afternoon of June 28 I saw a wren enter the bluebird box containing two young birds, one day old. I fully intended to go out and investigate this visit of the wren, but some duty or other called me away and I did not think of it again until I observed the dejected appearance of the Bluebirds the next morning. I opened the box and saw one dead nestling. Whether the wren came back and threw out the second bird, or the parent Bluebirds removed it from the nest, I will never know. This wanton killing was the last straw. Down came the wren boxes!

One pair went across the drive and took possession of a bluebird box in the yard of my more indulgent neighbor, where they reared one brood. My Bluebirds took after them every opportunity they had. One day I saw Father Bluebird have a wren by the nape of the neck administering a well deserved punishment.

I chanced to be looking as this brood of wrens were about to leave the nest. I walked up to the box which was within easy reach. I stifled my desire to wring their necks, and gave my curiosity full sway. I wanted to see if my standing there would frighten them. They showed no fear of me at all, not even when I stroked the head of one of the nestlings. Two left the nest while I stood there. Had the parent birds been about I imagine they would have been told there was great danger nigh.

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